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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000814

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: SARG LAUNCHES NEW PR CAMPAIGN AGAINST ISLAMIC  
EXTREMISM

REF: A. DAMASCUS 790  
[1](#)B. IIR 7 102 0154 09  
[1](#)C. DAMASCUS 482  
[1](#)D. DAMASCUS 517  
[1](#)E. DAMASCUS 723  
[1](#)F. DAMASCUS 714  
[1](#)G. DAMASCUS 679  
[1](#)H. DAMASCUS 678  
[1](#)I. 2004 DAMASCUS 4068

Classified By: CDA George Novinger for reasons 1.5 b and d.

[1](#)1. (S/NF) Summary: In a November 7 special Syrian TV broadcast, Fatah al-Islam members confessed to their involvement in the September 27 bombing of a SARG intelligence facility (REF A). This program appeared to be part of a broader Syrian propaganda effort to portray Syria as a victim, not a sponsor, of terrorism. Many local observers, however, believe that the SARG's complicated ties to Fatah al-Islam are part of a murkier world in which Syrian officials have selectively sought to crack down on some Islamist groups while tacitly allowing others, such as foreign fighter facilitators, to operate. Though Syria still remains the primary hub for Al-Qaida facilitation into Iraq (REF B), the SARG is now trying to convince E.U. and other governments that Islamic extremist elements represent a shared threat and a common ground for counterterrorism cooperation. End Summary

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TV CONFESSIONS  
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[1](#)2. (S/NF) Syrian TV broadcast a November 7 program featuring the confessions of some 20 Fatah al-Islam members, including the daughter and son-in-law of Fatah al-Islam leader Shakr al-Absy, of their involvement in a September 27 attack against a prominent SARG military intelligence installation. Diplomatic and Syrian contacts point out that Syria's relationship with Fatah al-Islam dates back several years, to when Shakr al-Absy maintained ties to Intifadah al-Islam, a Palestinian terrorist group which reportedly trained in Syria. Under Absy's leadership, offshoot Fatah al-Islam operated in Syria before moving to Jordan, where Absy was believed to have been involved in the 2002 murder of USAID Officer Laurence Foley. A few years later, after the SARG denied Jordanian efforts to extradite Absy, Absy moved to the Nahr al Bared camp in northern Lebanon. After a two-month confrontation with Lebanese Armed Forces, Absy reportedly returned to Syria, where he mysteriously disappeared.

13. (S/NF) Absy's turbulent relations with the Syrian regime provide a momentary glimpse into the SARG's effort to manage relations with extremist groups. Since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Syrian Government has sought to exploit anti-Western Islamic extremists to lessen U.S. influence in the region, while ruthlessly cracking down on any groups that might represent a threat to the minority and largely secular Syrian Allewite regime. As then-FM Shara stated in 2003, "Syria's interest is to see the invaders defeated in Iraq." Though U.S. and Western pressure helped convince the SARG to take some steps to crack down on these movements, the SARG continued to turn a blind eye to chosen facilitator networks. Embassy contacts report that the SARG made a calculation to ignore, and at times support, foreign fighters in order to keep Coalition forces bogged down so that the U.S. could not set its sights on "regime change" in Damascus.

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WORLDS COLLIDE  
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14. (S/NF) On September 27, the line between the SARG's support of some extremist groups and its crackdown on others blurred when unknown terrorists bombed a SARG intelligence facility in the greater Damascus. According to diplomatic and other contacts, Fatah al-Islam undertook the attack in revenge for a recent SARG roundup of its members, including Fatah al Islam leader Sahkr al-Absy and the government's heavy-handed tactics at Seidnaya prison, which houses detained Islamic extremists (REFs C & D).

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15. (S/NF) After enjoying a long relationship with the SARG, many here believe Fatah al-Islam elements turned their sights on the regime and lashed out at one of the main pillars of Syrian stability and security - the SARG intelligence apparatus - specifically striking the SARG security element responsible for said crack-downs, the Palestine Branch of the Syrian Military Intelligence Service.

16. (S/NF) In the wake of the bombing, which reportedly killed more than 17 individuals, SARG officials swiftly branded the attacks as the work of "Islamic extremists," orchestrated and funded by outside elements. News outlets were unusually quick to broadcast scenes from the bombing site and release details about the attack, including the fact the vehicle used in the bombing came from a "neighboring country." The SARG conducted a series of visible security sweeps and broad-daylight raids of neighborhoods suspected of housing terrorist cells (REFs E & F) and televised the confessions of arrested individuals the SARG claims were involved in the September 27 bombing, all in what appeared to be an effort to not only demonstrate that Syrian intelligence services remain firmly in control of the security situation but also to project blame outward so as to down-play Syrian complicity with extremist elements.

17. (S/NF) The November 7 Syrian TV broadcast represented SARG obfuscation at its finest. The confessions featured Wafa al-Absy, daughter of Fatah al-Islam's leader Shaker al-Absy. Al-Absy's Syrian spouse was also among those who confessed publicly. A number of the confessors made claims of a direct connection between Fatah al-Islam and Saad Hariri's Future Movement (Mustaqbal) in Lebanon. As the Syrian reports indicate, many of those involved in the bombing were in fact Syrian. The reports in essence showcased home-grown extremists, who may have been inspired by foreign extremist elements the SARG allowed to live among its own people.

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SARG: WE'RE WITH YOU IN THE FIGHT AGAINST EXTREMISM  
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18. (S/NF) The SARG has expressed its concerns over the rise of extremism to visiting foreign dignitary since the explosion. According to Danish Embassy contacts, for example, President Asad told Danish FM Moller that fighting extremism was the number-one priority of his government and went on to accuse Saudi Arabia as being the main financier and actor behind the rise of violent extremism in Syria. Also, at the conclusion of FM Muallim's October 27 visit to London, both he and U.K. FM Miliband released a joint statement which stated that "both ministers agreed that tackling al-Qaida and groups inspired by it was a high priority and agreed to work more closely together to tackle this threat." A Palestinian American academic who enjoys frequent access to Syrian FM Muallim told us in early November that SARG senior leadership had grown increasingly concerned about extremism, seeing it as a threat to the regime itself. He also reported that while senior Syrian officials "blamed" the United States for the rise of Islamic extremism, they believed that only the U.S. could assist in ridding Syria of these elements.

19. (S/NF) Comment: The SARG conveniently defines terrorism as threats against the Syrian regime while upholding Syria's long-standing support of "resistance" groups fighting outside invaders. Fatah al-Islam was able to dwell in both worlds and is now being used to advance the SARG's desire to cooperate with the West while blaming Saudi Arabia, al-Mustaqbal, Lebanon and the U.S. At the same time, the SARG continues to tolerate foreign fighters and other extremists heading to Iraq. The SARG publicly plays the victim in an attempt to obfuscate its involvement in playing the spoiler. But if the cost of doing business with such elements begins to soar, i.e., future successful attacks against the regime or Western targets within Syria, the SARG may have little choice but to take on foreign fighter elements residing within Syria's borders.  
NOVINGER